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ABSTRACT

Two national in-home interview surveys conducted by the Gallup Organization and information from a national workshop conference attended by 70 teen volunteers from 28 states and 200 teachers and adult leaders indicate that about three-fifths of youth aged 12 to 17 volunteer an average of just over 3 hours a week. The most frequent volunteer activities are those sponsored by religious organizations, youth development groups, and schools; these are supplemented by informal volunteering on an individual basis. Teens most often become involved by being asked or because a friend or relative was involved or benefitted from the activity. The most active teen volunteers have had positive early childhood experiences relating to volunteering and involvement before age 11. They are likely to be active members of a church or synagogue and to have a value system that emphasizes helping others. School-sponsored community youth service programs are increasing. Students generally do not react negatively to school service requirements. Volunteering during the teen years tends to lead to volunteering in adulthood. Four graphs describe volunteer activities. (Contains 6 references.) (SLD)

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America's Teenagers as VOLUNTEERS

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America's Teenagers as VOLUNTEERS

by

E.B. Knauft

INDEPENDENT SECTOR

E.B. (Burt) Knauft was executive vice president and chief operating officer of INDEPENDENT SECTOR until his retirement at the end of 1992. His publications include *Profiles of Excellence: Achieving Success in the Nonprofit Sector*, *Self-Perceptions of Effectiveness: A Survey of Nonprofit Voluntary Organizations*, and *The Filer Commission Revisited*.

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Metropolitan Life Foundation

Summary of Key Findings

Research on the volunteering patterns of teenagers and experiences of the most successful teen volunteer programs leads to these conclusions:

- About three-fifths of all teens aged 12 through 17 are engaged in formal and informal volunteering for an average of over three hours per week.

- The most frequent teen volunteer activities are those sponsored by religious organizations, youth development groups and schools, supplemented by informal volunteering, such as babysitting for free or helping friends or relatives not part of one's household.

- Teens most often become involved in volunteering by being asked by someone, by being a member of an organization or because a friend or family member was involved in the activity or benefitted from it.

- The most active teen volunteers have these characteristics:

  (1) They had positive early childhood experiences relating to volunteering, such as the role model provided by their parents, and involvement as a volunteer before the age of 11;

  (2) They are likely to be active members of a church or synagogue and to volunteer there as well as in other settings;

  (3) They have a value system that emphasizes helping others, feeling compassion toward people in need and a desire to do something for a cause that is important to them;

(4) They have a high activity level, are more likely to have a part-time job, be involved in student government and report having very little spare time.

- There is a growth in school-sponsored community youth service programs ranging from those that encourage volunteering as part of after-school activities to those offering for-credit courses in community service which require a number of hours of volunteering. A few school systems even require volunteer service as one condition for graduation.

- Schools that encourage community service have a higher percentage of youth volunteers. Although teens would rather be involved voluntarily, most do not react negatively to programs requiring community service.

- Formal and informal volunteer experiences during the teen years tend to lead to a consistent pattern of volunteering in adulthood. Overall, it can be concluded that teen volunteering affords a positive experience for youth, benefits society in many ways and establishes a foundation for adult volunteering.

America's Teenagers as Volunteers

Ask the average adult to use three or four words to describe the American teenager and the chances are great that the word "volunteer" would not be mentioned. The tendency for the media to focus on the sensational and the negative draws attention away from the many unheralded day-to-day activities that signal positive accomplishments by young people in our society. These activities are especially significant because they involve many teenagers who are helping others in a variety of ways. Volunteering by teenagers is on the increase and establishes a pattern that encourages them to continue their volunteering as adults.

We will examine the facts about teen volunteering, how they were attracted in the first place, what kinds of activities they perform and why they continue to volunteer. We'll look at informal helping of friends and neighbors, as well as successful formal volunteer programs organized by schools, churches and community youth groups. And finally, we'll review the characteristics of the active teen volunteer and the factors in the home and the community that stimulate volunteering.

A Few Vignettes

- It is 7 a.m. and John knocks at the door of room 814 of the senior citizen high-rise. He's arisen a half-hour early today, as he has every day for the last month, to stop on the way to school to put drops in the eyes of an elderly woman suffering from glaucoma. She needs the drops daily, but can't put them in herself due to arthritis. John's friend Susan will perform the same service on her way home from school in the afternoon.

- Fifteen teenagers gather in the front yard of a badly weathered home. The elderly owner, still recovering from his third heart attack, is unable to paint it himself and cannot afford to have it done by professionals. Today the young people, under the guidance of a gardener from a nearby nursery, are trimming bushes and pruning trees, while others are scraping and priming the house with the help of two retired painters from Local #386.

- Two young people are walking around a fourth-grade classroom monitoring the children's mock emergency calls on 911. They're called BATmen by the kids, for they are instructors of the Red Cross's Basic Aid Training (BAT) program: a six session course in basic home survival skills for children who often find themselves alone when they come home from school. A few months ago, this lesson in getting emergency help enabled one nine-year-old to save his grandfather's life when he fell down with a heart attack.

- At The Bridge, a shelter for runaway youth, one high school student is sitting by the phone and two others are joining in on a group session with kids who have come to the shelter in the last two days. Not much older than the runaways themselves, they are valued volunteers. They have the natural advantage of being close to the age of the troubled youth, and the further advantage of skills gained through the YWCA's peer counseling program.

The Facts About Teen Volunteering

How typical are these examples and how many young people regularly engage in either formal or informal volunteering? We have solid evidence on the subject from two national in-home interview surveys conducted by The Gallup Organization, Inc. for INDEPENDENT SECTOR and from a national workshop-conference attended by 70 teen volunteers from 28 states and 200 teachers and adult leaders.

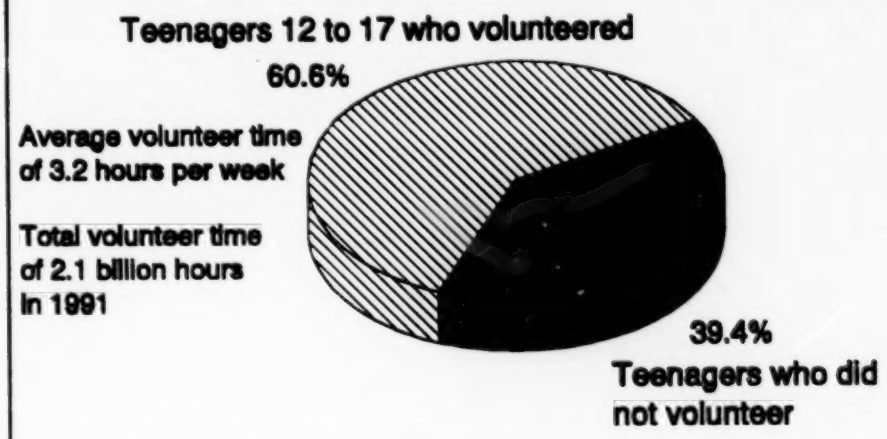
The Extent of Teen Volunteering. About three-fifths (61%) of youth (ages 12 to 17) volunteered an average of 3.2 hours per week. Of that group of volunteers, over one-fourth volunteered five or more hours per week, and almost half volunteered two or more hours. If these statistics seem unrealistic, listen to this comment from an 11th grader who was asked how she does so much volunteering and what she would tell other young people who say they don't have time to volunteer:

> "You have to put your priorities in order, on what is important to you, what you want to accomplish. I never waste time; I watch TV about a half hour a week versus up to seven hours a day for some kids. People really don't have a right to tell me that they don't have any time to volunteer or to help others."

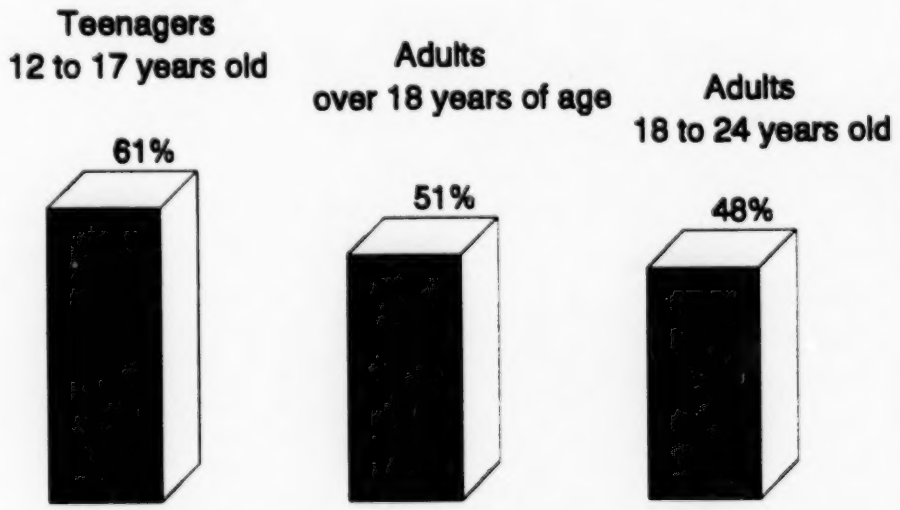
Male and female teens do not differ in their rate of volunteering, but teens of ages 12 to 17 actually volunteered at a higher rate than adults. While 61% of teens volunteered, the comparable rate for adults was 51%. There was an even greater difference between the 12 to 17 group and young adults in the 18 to 24 age range: the latter group had 48% volunteers versus the 61% rate for those below 18.

It is estimated that teenage volunteers gave about 2.1 billion hours in 1991 in both formal and informal volunteering. The formal volunteering represented the equivalent of almost 1 million employees with a value estimated at $7 billion.

The Extent of Teenage Volunteering


Teenagers 12 to 17 who volunteered
60.6%
Average volunteer time of 3.2 hours per week
Total volunteer time of 2.1 billion hours in 1991
39.4%
Teenagers who did not volunteer

Volunteer Rates



The Range of Volunteer Activities. Volunteering has been defined as any activity that is carried out to help others and not conducted for monetary or material gain. Some researchers have restricted the definition to formal volunteer programs of nonprofit groups, including community organizations, schools and churches and synagogues. However, a broader and more realistic definition includes the informal volunteering involved in helping friends and relatives not members of one's household, babysitting for free, or helping in very occasional events such as baking cookies for a school fair. In contrast, formal volunteering tends to be on-going, involves an agreed-upon time commitment and is sponsored or coordinated by an organization or institution.

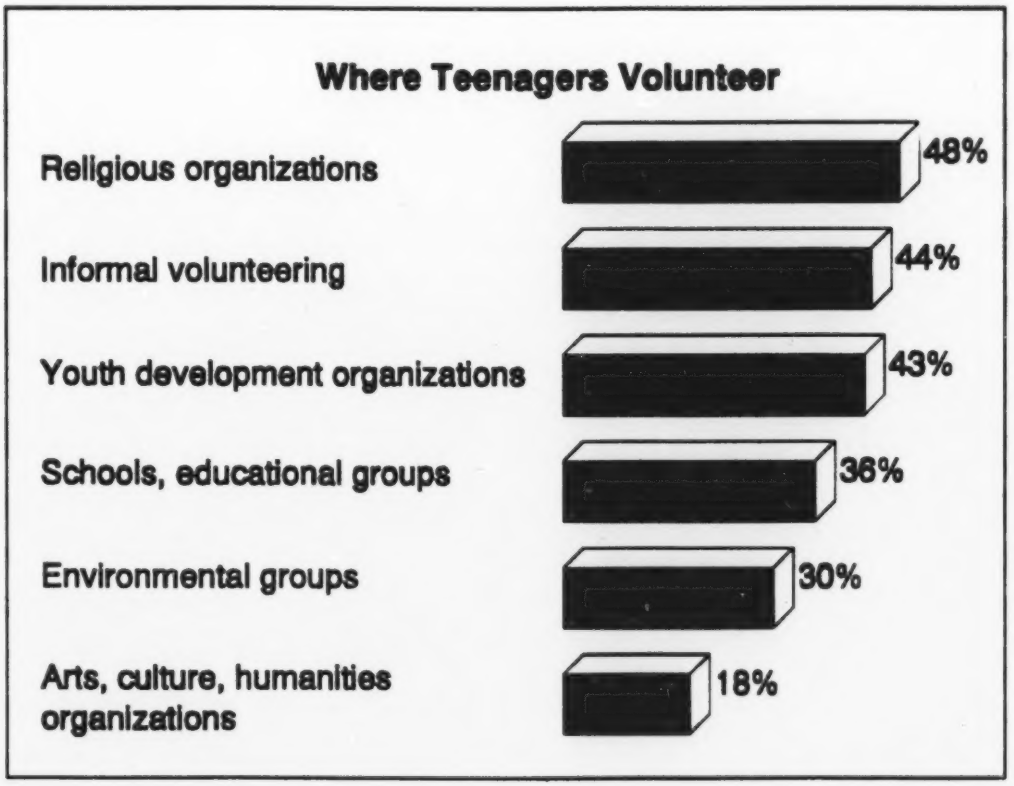
Teens reported volunteering most frequently in the following areas:

- Religious organizations: 48% volunteered;
- Informal volunteering: 44%;
- Youth development organizations: 43%;
- Schools, educational groups: 36%;
- Environmental groups: 30%;
- Arts, culture, humanities: 18%;

Turning to specific volunteer activities, we find these examples, listed in order of the amount of participation:

- Babysitting (not as part of formal organization);
- Youth group leader or aide;
- Clean-up or janitorial work;
- Arts volunteer (theater, arts or music);
- Assisting the elderly, handicapped or home-bound;
- Aide or assistant to paid employees;
- Choir member or director;
- Sunday School or Bible teacher;

There are many other examples not mentioned as frequently, that, taken in the aggregate, add up to thousands of hours. These include serving as a coach or recreational volunteer, church usher, office work and answering phones, aide in a library, aide to clergy, committee member or officer of an organization, counselor, hospital volunteer and helping in a nursing home.



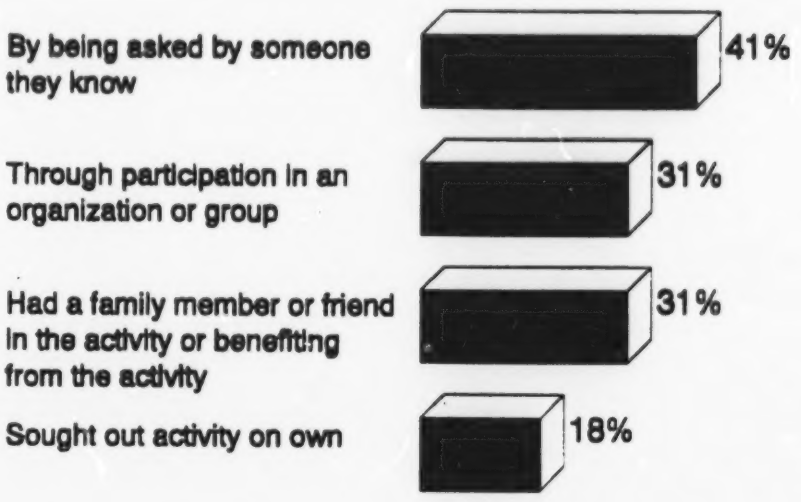
How Teen Volunteers Get Involved. When teens are asked how they first learned about their volunteer activities, they most frequently mention that they were asked by someone (41%). Other routes to volunteering include participation in an organization as a member (31%) and because a family member or friend was involved in the activity or benefitted from it (31%). Only 18% reported that they sought out the activity on their own. Regarding the most frequent route to volunteering - being asked by someone - the most effective "asker" is a friend, generally someone already involved in the volunteer activity who can describe it with enthusiasm from first-hand knowledge. Other frequently mentioned "askers" are teachers, family members and relatives or someone in the church or synagogue.

The organizations most frequently attracting or recruiting volunteers are the church or synagogue (mentioned 62% of the time), the school (34%), and other charitable or voluntary organizations (23%).

Examples of Volunteer Activities

- Baby-sitting
- Youth group leader or aide
- Clean-up or janitorial work
- Arts volunteer (theater, arts, or music)
- Assisting the elderly, handicapped or home-bound
- Aide or assistant to paid employees
- Choir member or director
- Sunday School or Bible teacher

How Teenagers Learn About Volunteer Opportunities


By being asked by someone they know
41%
Through participation in an organization or group
31%
Had a family member or friend in the activity or benefiting from the activity
31%
Sought out activity on own
18%

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Characteristics of the Active Teen Volunteer

A study of the background factors, personal characteristics, values and attitudes of the most active teen volunteers yields clues about how they become motivated to help others and why they remain involved in volunteer activities. Not every young volunteer possesses all of these characteristics, but the most active ones generally fit a pattern that includes the following characteristics.

1. **Positive Early Childhood Experiences.** The typical teen volunteer has already established a pattern of involvement before the age of 12:

   - Over two-fifths (44%) of teen volunteers participated in volunteer activities before the age of 11, and one-third were involved before the age of 10.
   - They belonged to a youth group.
   - They had raised money for a cause or organization by going from door to door.
   - They saw someone in their family help others, and their parents provided a role model by being volunteers themselves.
   - They were active in student government in their school.

2. **The Role of Religion and Religious Affiliation.** The active teen volunteer is more likely to belong to a church or synagogue and volunteer there. Such volunteering covers a wide scope of activities, and the data show that over 40% of church-related activities reach out to the larger community and to non-members in many ways distinct from the sacramental or educational activities of the church or synagogue.

   It is also found that youth and adults volunteering in religious groups are the same persons that volunteer most often for other causes and organizations.

These statistics illustrate the role of religion in teen volunteering:

- 74% of all teens reported being members of a religious institution, and 67% of them were volunteers. This compares with 42% volunteers among those who were not church or synagogue members.

- There were 70% volunteers among the teens who attended weekly religious services, compared to 63% volunteers among those who attended once or twice a month, and 48% for those who attended only a few times a year.

- There were 80% volunteers among the teens who described their religious views as "conservative," whereas there were 60% volunteers among those describing their religious views as "liberal" or middle-of-the-road.

3. **Values, Attitudes and Goals.** Several psychological factors are descriptive of the most active teen volunteers. Foremost is a value system placing emphasis on the need to help others, feeling compassion toward people in need and a desire to do something for a cause that is important to one. By contrast, these teens place much less emphasis on material values or personal gains derived from volunteering, such as volunteer experience would look good on their resume or be a means of exploring career options. In addition, the least important reason these teens give for volunteering is "I have a lot of free time."

   In essence, these teens exhibit an altruistic value system that expresses itself as a desire to help others, rather than being preoccupied with the rewards they might receive from volunteering, or viewing volunteering as a means of filling one's spare time. It is encouraging that there are many young people across the nation that possess this kind of value system. Such values also carry over to the career goals expressed by these young volunteers: more of them expressed an interest in working with the elderly or handicapped, doing religious work, social work or entering the field of nursing. Careers in

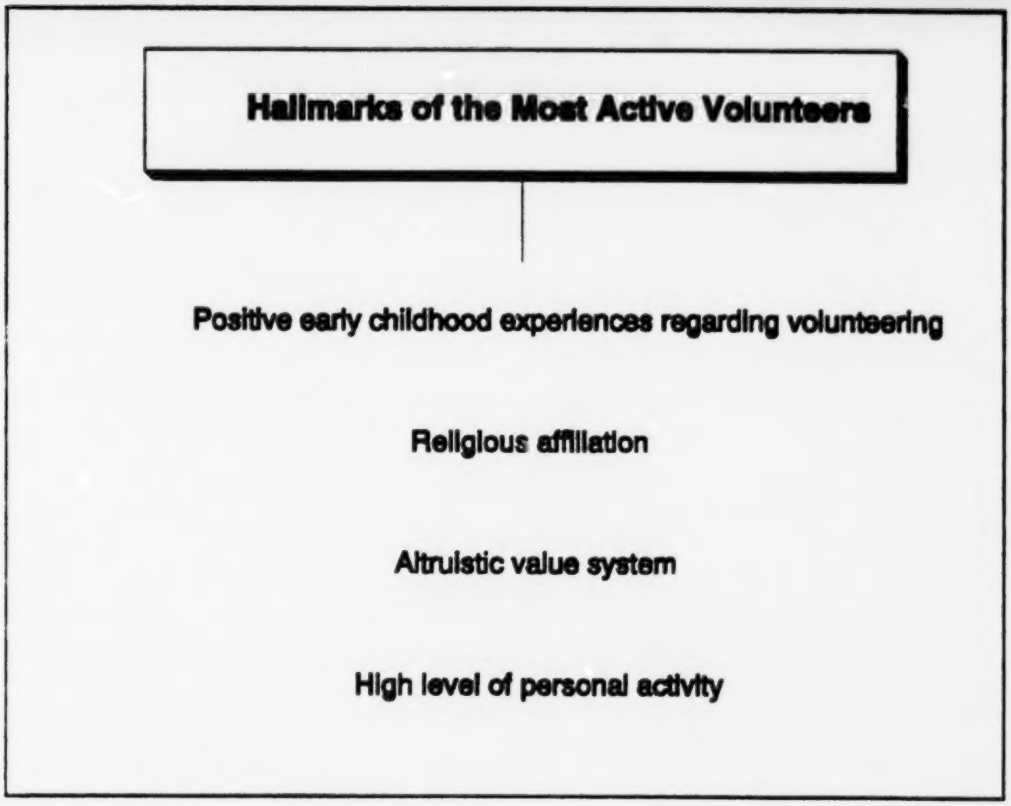
computing, the media, business or law were mentioned less frequently.

A similar theme emerges from responses to a question about the values volunteers consider important in making career choices. They placed the greatest importance on maintaining high moral standards, making a contribution to learning and knowledge, and having a chance to work with the needy. Of lesser importance were the values of gaining personal prestige and earning a high salary.

4. **The Activity Syndrome.** Another characteristic of the teen volunteer is the presence of a high level of personal activity, in contrast to being a "loner" or sitting at home watching television. One indicator is the finding that teens with part-time jobs are more likely to volunteer than those who do not work. Another indicator shows that volunteers place a higher value on being active in community or public affairs than non-volunteers. And finally, the fact that having free time is not often mentioned as a reason for volunteering suggests that they are too busy to have free time. Evidence suggests that this "activity syndrome" characterizes volunteers throughout the life-span from pre-teens to senior citizens in their seventies and beyond.

   A significant number of youth are engaged in informal volunteering before the age of ten or eleven and they continue volunteering as they get older. When reaching adulthood, some of the informal volunteering turns into formal volunteering, and the volunteer pattern tends to continue throughout life. Even after retirement, the person with a part-time job is a more active volunteer than those not working or those who say they have a lot of spare time.

   The presence of a high activity level helps describe the involved volunteer, but the motivations driving the volunteer seem to have their roots in background factors -- especially the impact of early life experiences and the role models and stimulation provided by parents, church and school.


Hallmarks of the Most Active Volunteers
Positive early childhood experiences regarding volunteering
Religious affiliation
Altruistic value system
High level of personal activity

Effective Youth Volunteer Programs

It was mentioned that organizations most likely to attract teen volunteers and operate effective youth volunteer programs are churches and synagogues, schools and community youth organizations. We'll look at each type of organizations and the factors that make their programs effective.

Churches and Synagogues. Youth are typically attracted to these programs through church attendance or membership, and that involvement leads to participation in a variety of volunteer activities. They include helping carry out religious and educational functions of the institution through serving as choir members, helping lead youth worship services, teaching or serving as teacher aides in classes for young children, or babysitting for toddlers. Other volunteering may include helping maintain the building and grounds, assisting in a soup kitchen, helping elderly or disabled persons or being part of a church sponsored youth group that

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provides services to the community. The added attraction for the young volunteer is the presence of her/his friends and peers in the activity.

Schools. School volunteer problems deserve special mention because of their rapid growth in recent years and the fact that some of these programs may include community volunteering as part of a graduation requirement. The latter practice raises the question of whether "mandatory" volunteering violates the freedom of choice and freedom of initiative inherent in the concept of volunteering. Proponents of requiring volunteering as part of a school program point out that such programs introduce young people to the rewarding experience of volunteering, thus building a "habit" of volunteering.

A national study found a wide spectrum of school volunteer programs ranging from no formal encouragement for community service to requiring such service as one condition for graduation. These examples illustrate the range of school volunteer programs:

1. School clubs and other extra-curricular activities are used to encourage students to perform community service, but no school credits are given.

2. The school establishes a volunteer clearinghouse through which students learn about a wide array of volunteer opportunities in the community. If students find a suitable placement, they check it out personally and then sign a "contract" to carry out the volunteer service. No academic credits are involved, and the clearinghouse may be staffed either by a faculty member or by an adult volunteer from an organization such as a local Voluntary Action Center.

3. The school sponsors a community service credit program that gives students an established number of credit hours for volunteer service, such as one-semester credit for 100 hours of community service. In some schools or school systems, students are required to perform a specified number of hours of volunteer service in order to graduate; in others, they are awarded elective credits that may be used in lieu of other credits, such as in social studies or humanities.

4. The school offers a formal course in community service. In this case, the student's volunteer experience is combined with classroom activities that provide information, skills and principles assisting students in interpreting their experiences and making the most of their volunteer assignments. A typical example would be a one-semester social studies class meeting two hours per day. Students spend four days (eight hours) per week in volunteer assignments in the field and one day (two hours) per week in class.

Survey data on school volunteer or public service programs reveal the following:

- There is a clear relationship between the amount of volunteering and the extent to which a school encourages community service. The 55% of schools encouraging volunteering had 74% student volunteers, compared to 44% volunteers in schools that did not encourage this practice.

- Twenty-one percent of teens surveyed attended schools that offered a course for credit which required community service as part of the course. In those schools, there were 78% volunteers, compared to 56% volunteers in schools where such a course was not offered.

- Eight percent of teens reported their school requires a certain number of hours of community service for graduation. There were 78% volunteers among current students in those schools, compared to 62% volunteers in schools not having that requirement.

- The results were ambiguous when students were asked their opinions of school programs requiring community service: 56% would rather be involved voluntarily, but 50% still think community service is a good idea; 45% felt requiring it "is okay if people benefit from it," and only 9% would be "angry" if required to perform community service. There were 50% volunteers in the "angry" group, compared to 63% to 72% volunteers in the first three response groups.

In summary, the encouragement of community service by schools increases the percentage of youth volunteers. While the teens would

rather be involved voluntarily, most of them do not react negatively to school programs that require community service. Even in the latter group, there are still half that are volunteers.

Community Organizations and Youth Agencies. The third type of teen volunteering centers around youth groups such as Girl Scouts, Boy Scouts, Camp Fire, YMCA, YWCA and 4-H. Some of these organizations encourage volunteering through awards or merit badges, and others initiate group projects like maintaining a park, helping in a local library or providing companionship to persons in a nursing home. Many communities have a Voluntary Action Center that functions as a clearinghouse of volunteer needs in the community and matches individuals with suitable assignments. These centers are sources of information for youth agencies that are seeking to place their volunteers, as well as serving to recruit teen and adult volunteers for a wide range of opportunities.

Conclusion

The fact that over 60% of teens are volunteering an average of over three hours a week indicates not only that volunteering is a well-accepted activity among America's youth, but that there is a likely potential for more volunteers and for greater participation by current volunteers. The wide range of informal volunteering and community service activities provides a positive experience for youth and provides society with an estimated two billion hours of service annually.

A second important consequence of teen volunteering is the creation of a behavior pattern or "habit" that carries into adulthood. The young person experiences the meaning of volunteering and the positive values that accompany it, and hence is more likely to be an active adult volunteer.

Few teens become volunteers on their own initiative, but have to be asked by others - particularly parents, teachers and young friends who are already volunteering. The major avenues of formal teen volunteering are through church or synagogue, school and community youth organizations. Since the school is an institution common to all teens, it is encouraging to find that more schools and school systems are supporting community service, are helping students to find appropriate volunteer assignments, and, in some cases, relating the volunteer experiences to course work in social studies or the humanities.

The most important outcome of teen volunteering is not the number of hours given, but the impact of this activity on the young person. The focus on helping others, of achieving success as a member of a group that serves the community and being able to broaden one's horizons are the rewards of the teen volunteer.

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Other groups that can provide information include:

Corporation for National and Community Service
1100 Vermont Ave., NW
10th Floor
Washington, DC 20525

National Association of Service and Conservation Corps.
666 11th Street, NW
Suite 500
Washington, DC 20001

Points of Light Foundation
Youth Engaged in Service Program
1737 H Street, NW
Washington, DC 20006

Youth Service America
1101 15th Street, NW
Suite 200
Washington, DC 20005

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